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ABSTRACT

A year-long thematic unit for fifth-graders combines critical thinking and whole language frameworks to help students retain, understand, and make active use of knowledge within and across domains. Using systematic instruction in critical thinking, students explore the fundamental human concepts of race, sex, age, and power. David Perkins' "knowledge as design" method of critical thinking, the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking framework for teaching and assessing critical thinking, S. Lytle and M. Botel's Pennsylvania Framework for reading, writing, and talking, and Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences are integrated to help students read and remake the world. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/RS)

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Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it.

Zen proverb

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Making Memoirs and Visions

(an inquiry based thematic unit for helping 5th graders
to retain, understand, and make active use of knowledge)

by

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Abstract

A year long thematic unit for 5th graders, " Making Memoirs and Visions " combines critical thinking and whole language frameworks to help students retain, understand, and make active use of knowledge within and across domains. David Perkins' knowledge as design method of critical thinking, the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking framework for teaching and assessing critical thinking, Lytle and Botel's PA Framework for reading, writing, talking, and, finally, Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences are integrated to help students read and remake the world.

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Description

Using systematic instruction in critical thinking as its primary strategy, " Making Memoirs and Visions " helps 5th graders to explore a handful of fundamental human concepts: race, sex, age, and power. Students design a number of intellectual products that ferret out issues emerging from these concepts as they explain the human condition in the 20th century and beyond. And because everyday issues emerging from race, sex, age, and power make up the world of early American settlers and third millennium space explorers alike, students will connect past, present, and future throughout the unit.

Memoirs look back at the world. Visions look ahead. Both inform the present.

Inquiry

Throughout the unit, students have a lot of chances to find inquiries of their own. For the teacher, however, two related questions will be pursued all year:

1. How can students be taught to understand knowledge in Science, Social Studies, and Literature?
2. What knowledge is worth understanding? (i.e. What themes or big ideas organize these subjects?)

Goals

In *Smart Schools: From Training Memories to Educating Minds,* David Perkins offers three goals. He says schools should help students to do the following:

1. retain knowledge;
2. understand knowledge; and,
3. use knowledge actively.

Similarly, in the " Making Memoirs and Visions " thematic unit, students will retain, understand, and make active use of knowledge about race, sex, age, and power as highlighted in Science, Social Studies, and Literature. This is a strategic goal aimed at helping them to connect knowledge and life--or as Paulo Freire says, to read and remake the world.

Critical Concepts

The concepts **race, sex, age, and power** appear throughout the Literature based, Houghton Mifflin Reading and Social Studies programs in use at Joseph Pennell Academics Plus elementary school in Philadelphia. These issues also appear in life. They make up the critical concepts presented in the thematic unit. In addition, the concept **understanding** is essential to the inquiry.

David Perkins' says understanding is the ability to " perform in a variety of thought-demanding ways with the topic, for instance to: explain, muster evidence, find examples, generalize, apply concepts, analogize, represent in a new way..."

All year, students and the teacher will struggle to think critically about this set of fundamental concepts.

Critical Issues

The most important issues will come from student inquiries, but it is possible to begin with a model case. Suppose we take a look at Gwen Brooks' " Life of Lincoln West." Seven year old Lincoln loves everybody. But his parents, teachers, schoolmates and others reject him because of his African features. He fails to fit their standard of beauty. Lincoln learns to overcome these rejections by calling himself the " real thing." He likes being the real thing--authentic African.

Issues of race, sex, age, and power stand tall in the poem. For examples, who has the power to define beauty? Should standards of beauty differ from race to race, sex to sex, age to age? What does it mean to be a beautiful male or female? Would Cornel West's New World African vis a vis Old World African be more accurate and positive descriptors of African Americans than those currently in vogue?

In " Making Memoirs and Visions," students will have chances to explore issues that naturally flow from their experiences of Literature, Social Studies, and Science, and life. These explorations may continue well after the instructional year is over.

Critical Strategies

Just a handful of strategies for learning will help students retain, understand, and make active use of knowledge.

Critical Strategy One: Critical Thinking

Knowledge as design will be the introductory method of critical thinking. David Perkins, author of the knowledge as design method, claims that any human made object or idea is a " structure adapted to a purpose." Thus, a piece of chalk, for example, will have a purpose, structure, model case, and argument: What is it for? What is it made of? What is an example of it? How does it work? Does it work well? What pattern connects it to other writing instruments?

Likewise, with our " knowledge as design colored glasses " on, an idea, such as " thematic unit "can be seen in terms of these questions:

- What is the **purpose**?
- What is the **structure**?
- What is a **model case** of it?
- What are **arguments** about it (explanatory, evaluative, deep explanatory)?

These four design features help students--and teachers--to read the word and write to transform the world. Also, Perkins adds a fifth design feature that increases the utility of his system: Invent your own design.

When students become fluent in using knowledge as design to reason, read, write, talk, and listen, the **basic elements of thought** from NCECT's framework for teaching and assessing critical thinking will be added to their tools for retaining, understanding, and making active use of knowledge.

The basic elements of thought are these: **purpose, issues, point of view, concepts, assumptions, information, inferences, conclusions, implications, consequences.**

Students will learn how to use the basic elements of thought for critical reading, writing, and listening.

" All thought has a universal set of elements, each of which can be monitored for possible problems," says Richard Paul, president of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction.

" Are we clear about our purpose or goal? about the problem or question at issue? about our point of view or frame of reference? about our assumptions? about the claims we are making? about the reasons or evidence upon which we are basing our claims? about our inferences and line of reasoning? about the implications and consequences that follow from our reasoning? Critical thinkers develop the skills of identifying and assessing these elements in their thinking and the thinking of others."

Paul says making explicit use of the basic elements of thought helps a critical thinker to explore the background logic of both self and other. This dialectical, dialogical process can ferret out strengths and weakness in a given point of view and thus improve the thinking.

Critical Strategy Two: Active Approaches to Learning

Featured throughout the thematic unit are **active approaches to learning.** Students use KWL, double entry journals, SQP3R, real talk, cooperative learning, story maps (and other graphic organizers), television story boards, critical reading strategies, the doubting and believing game, literature studies, issue papers--all are thoughtful ways of learning. Specifically, the PA framework will be used to organize reading, writing, talking, and listening activities so students will be active learners throughout the year.

Lytle and Botel drew from the experiences of numerous successful teachers and the research base for reading and writing to design the PA framework, a whole language model. Essentially, their framework has three major components: four lenses, five critical experiences, and authentic assessments.

For them, making-sense, language, social, and human lenses provide a way of seeing instruction. Five critical experiences, reading, writing, extension of reading and writing, language, and learning to learn, help to design activities that require active learning. Finally, they see authentic assessments as a vital part of the teaching/learning process.

The Perkins, NCECT, Lytle and Botel frameworks overlap because they share a primary emphasis on active learning as a means of developing literacy.

Critical Strategy Three: Assessments of Understanding

In " Teaching for Understanding, " David Perkins' said that assessing performances of understanding is a vital part of the holistic process of learning. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences will guide selection or design of **assessments of understanding** throughout the unit. Gardner's work suggests that linguistic, mathematical, musical, kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences more accurately describe the range of human abilities to be considered in assessing performances of understanding. Moreso, he defines intelligence as the ability to solve complex problems or create intellectual products of value in one or more cultural settings."

" Making Memoirs and Visions " provides for assessments in each of these intelligences, though formal assessments are presently biased toward the linguistic, i.e., spoken and written assessments.

Also, the National Intellectual Standard guides examination of intellectual products i.e. performances of understanding. Using the National Intellectual Standard, students assess a range of intellectual products for these qualities: **clarity, precision, accuracy, relevance, consistency, logic, significance, good reasons, evidence, depth, breadth, and fairness.**

Lastly, the Student Progress Record Book (SPRB) documents authentic assessments of understanding and describes both individual and class progress in retaining, understanding, and making active use of knowledge.

Outcomes

Three significant outcomes will result from " Making Memoirs and Visions."

1. Students will be better able to retain, understand, and make active use of knowledge in Science, Social Studies and Literature. They will demonstrate this outcome in a portfolio of written works. The works will be assessed with the National Intellectual Standard.
2. Students will develop " literate voices " (people who can reason, read, write, speak, and listen well for fun and profit). They will demonstrate this outcome in a variety of performances across the seven intelligences.
3. Students will be better able to " solve complex problems and create intellectual products of value in one or more cultures " (Howard Gardner's definition of intelligence). They will demonstrate this in both portfolios of written work and enactments such as designing and acting out television story boards of literature and performing on video tape or in assembly programs.

Scores for the formal assessments will be recorded in the 1993-1994 Student Progress Record Book (SPRB) and, further documented in 10 issues of *Memoirs and Visions*, a monthly class magazine (September 1993 to June 1994). In addition, median scores on the City Wide Test of academic achievement will go up significantly, the number of D and F grades will go down, attendance will be equal or greater than the school norm--three measurements of success from Joseph Pennell's School Wide Project Plan. Finally, a portfolio of three science centered issue papers, three critical thinking essay tests in Social Studies, and three critical reviews of fiction as outgrowths of major literature studies will further document the outcomes.

About the Teacher

" It takes a whole village to raise a child."

That African proverb reminds me of another truth: it takes a lot of people to teach a child. Several people have already been involved in the development of " Making Memoirs and Visions." My Instructors in the Philadelphia Writing Project's Summer Institute at University of Pennsylvania: Susan Lytle, Regina Finlayson, Rita Hardy, Mickey Harris, Parthenia Moore, Marcia Resnick, and Diane Waff; special presenters such as Lennette Moore, Barbara Marshall, Judy Buchanan, Robert Fecho, Michelle Miller, Shirley Brown, and Dennis Creedon; journal group members Sharon Carter, Eva Farland, and Janice Voorhees; mentors Joan McNamara, Karen Zucker, Carolyn Garvin, Ruth Anderson, Cathy Hebert, Melodie Hayes; in addition to numerous authors including my role model Bernard Watson, brothers and sisters in Christ at Church of the Advocate, especially Priests Isaac Miller and Ann Smith, past teachers such as Edith Francis from Educational Testing Service, Gerald Nosich and Richard Paul from NCECT, Helmut Bartel from Temple University, and David Perkins from Harvard University--all have made significant contributions to the design of this thematic unit. They have given direct input, inspiration, encouragement or all three.

Mr. Fluellen, however, will be the teacher of record for Joseph Pennell's 5th Graders in this inquiry based thematic unit.

A member of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction (NCECT) and World Future Society, he recently became a Teacher Consultant in the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) at University of Pennsylvania (Summer Institute I 1993). He joins over 250 members of the PhilWP family in the Philadelphia Public School System.

Since 1989, the year he returned to the public school system after more than a decade of teaching at Temple University in a special program for underachieving freshmen, Mr. Fluellen has taught over 125 public school students the knowledge as design method of critical thinking that David Perkins, a Senior Research Associate at Harvard University, has been developing with school children in the Boston area as well as other sites around the world. In 1993, he added the NCECT framework to his instructional program for 5th graders.

Since 1990, as an outgrowth of his advanced graduate work in cognitive processes and studies with Helmut Bartel at Temple University, where he earned B.S. and M. Ed. degrees, Mr. Fluellen has been writing a series of papers about teaching critical thinking. To date, he has written seven papers in the series, three of which have been published in the ERIC data base for North America. They are as follows:

- " Project HOT "
- " The Holographic Whole Language Program "
- " Unpacking Richard Paul's Strong Sense Critical Thinking "

Two of his recent papers, " Developing 21st Century Strong Sense Critical Thinkers," and " Reflection: NCECT Advanced Training in Teaching Critical Thinking " are ready for submission to ERIC. Both papers explore the implications of systematic instruction in critical thinking at Joseph Pennell.

In August 1991 he participated in the International Conference for Excellence in Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California, and November 1992, he completed Educational Testing Service's training in teaching and assessing critical thinking. January 1993 and 1994, he completed advanced training in the National Council of Excellence in Critical Thinking (NCECT) framework, studying with Richard Paul and Gerald Nosich, respectively.

In 1993-1994, he combined the Lytle and Botel, Perkins, NCECT and Gardner, frameworks into one instructional program that connects whole language and critical thinking.

To continue his professional development, Mr. Fluellen has become a workshop facilitator for elementary school mathematics assessment in the NW Region of the Philadelphia School District. Also, he has registered for two Philadelphia Writing Project Seminars later this winter: " Writing for the 21st Century " and " Leadership Training " at University of Pennsylvania. Fall 1994, he plans to resume his doctoral studies in the College of Education at Temple University and expects to complete " Developing Critical Thinking Ability in Urban 5th Graders," a dissertation about teaching critical thinking in an urban, 5th grade class.

Finally, Mr. Fluellen shares the dream Paulo Freire writes about in his most recent book, *Pedagogy of the City*.

" We dream of an effective public-school system that will be constructed step by step within a space of creativity. We dream of a democratic school system where one practices a pedagogy of the question, where one teaches and one learns with seriousness, but where seriousness never becomes dullness. We dream of a school system where, in teaching necessarily the content, one teaches also how to think critically."

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